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SUBJECT: Jaffna University Students Also Suffering From Political Conflict

¶1. (SBU) Summary. More than most university students in Sri Lanka, the approximately 5,000 students currently studying at Jaffna University have felt the impact of the ongoing political tensions in missed classes, low funding, and deteriorating academic standards. This formerly prestigious university has suffered in recent years from LTTE intimidation, either directly or indirectly, including the recent rejection by the LTTE-backed student union of the appointment of a respected professor as Vice-Chancellor. While it is unclear whether the current situation can improve without a simultaneous improvement in the national political scene, several innovative programs may provide other outlets for students seeking higher education in Northern Sri Lanka. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) During the past four months, the University of Jaffna, (with approximately 5,000 students) has witnessed political protests, enforced boycotts of classes, voluntary withdrawal of all non-Tamil students and strong opposition to a new Presidentially-appointed Vice Chancellor (Reftel). The ongoing political strife and violence affecting the region have hampered administration of the University and reduced student opportunities. Problems regarding graduate retention, funding, and administration continue to grow and are exacerbated by the main student organizations that focus on political rather than academic concerns. Led by the LTTE-influenced Jaffna University Student Union (JUSU), students in Jaffna began a boycott of classes in December 2005, demanding that Sri Lankan Army (SLA) forces be stationed away from the University campus. (Note: SLA forces are stationed approximately 200 yards from campus. End note) Student protestors clashed with SLA soldiers on several occasions, resulting in injuries to University students and administrators. As a result of this violence, and other pressures, the small cohort of 70 Sinhalese and Muslim students (less than 2 percent of total enrollment) attending the University requested and received transfers to other universities. After the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE completed their first round of ceasefire implementation talks in Geneva in late February, 2006, students backed down from their demand about the location of SLA forces and classes began again in early March, thus indicating the extent to which campus politics mirror national events. Since the mid-1980s, the University has consistently experienced disruption of classes due to

rising political tensions in Jaffna. Over the years, this pattern has left the University deficient in several important aspects.

Graduate Retention, Funding and Administration

13. (SBU) Formerly one of the leading universities in Sri Lanka, the University of Jaffna's prestige has declined due to the political pressures and periodic violence affecting all of the Jaffna peninsula. According to the University Grants Commission (UGC), the university has seen its student intake drop by nearly ten percent during the past five years. For the same time period, student intake has increased for the top three Sri Lankan universities. Furthermore, students of the University are not likely to remain in Jaffna after graduation, instead often seeking employment in Colombo or abroad. The Jaffna region finds itself in an unfortunate cycle: without attractive employment options, graduates who could contribute to the local economy do not remain, leaving the region short of educated professionals who could generate prosperous employment opportunities.

14. (SBU) Jaffna University also lacks for funds due to the low level of income generated by its post-graduate degree programs. In other Sri Lankan universities, post-graduate schools charge significant fees from their students. Jaffna's Faculty of Graduate Studies, offering nine post-graduate degree programs with over 400 current students, cannot charge as much in the way of fees because of low demand for entry into the faculty. These graduate masters and doctoral programs are the only source of additional income for the University. Some administrators

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believe that additional funding would be available if requested from the UGC (the body that allocates funds among the universities), but since the overall number of students has decreased recently, the UGC is less likely to approve funding increases for the future. In the current security climate and without a source of additional revenue, the University faces difficulties in obtaining the same caliber of teachers and resources as universities that do generate large tuition-based revenue. (Note: The UGC's allocation to Jaffna University, on a per pupil basis, matches that of other Sri Lankan universities. End note)

15. (SBU) The political volatility in the region has made dynamic administrators hesitant to join the University. The recent troubled appointment of a new Vice Chancellor serves as a prime example (Reftel). Ratnajeevan Hoole, a former professor in the U.S. and one of Jaffna University's top choices, was appointed Vice Chancellor by President Rajapaksa in March 2006. The Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and another candidate for Vice Chancellor, Professor K. Kandasamy, said that most of the University staff view Hoole as the appropriate person to fill the vacant Vice Chancellor position.

16. (SBU) Despite Hoole's credentials, the JUSU opposed his appointment, accusing him of being an anti-Tamil nationalist and a traitor to the LTTE cause. The LTTE strongly warned him against coming to Jaffna. Harsha Aturupane, senior education economist at the World Bank, said the threat from the LTTE is very real, particularly since several high school principals have been targeted in the Jaffna region recently. The Chairman of the UGC told us recently that Hoole, fearing for his life, has decided to take leave and reside abroad until the storm over his appointment dies down, at which time he will probably resign and may take a position on the UGC. However, other sources tell CAO that Hoole may seek asylum in Singapore.

Students Lack Unbiased Voice

17. (SBU) Faced with these problems, the student body, instead of working together with the administration to take steps towards improvement, has been cowed by the LTTE-backed student union, which focuses almost exclusively on political concerns. Professor Hoole told us several students have reported that because they do not come from the LTTE-controlled Vanni region of the North, they have been intimidated from running for leadership positions and cannot get on the student union ballot. Furthermore, he stated there have been reports of impostors taking the place of entering students for the purpose of influencing university decisions and making the campus a platform for furthering LTTE-related goals. (Comment: In fact, campus life in most of Sri Lanka's 14 other universities is dominated by politics, creating a hostile atmosphere for non-political students. In most of the other universities, the dominating political force is the pro-Sinhala, Buddhist, nationalist Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP). End Comment.)

New Programs Have Promise

18. (SBU) In light of the difficulties facing the University of Jaffna, three programs show promise for improving Jaffna's higher education system. The nationwide World Bank program "Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education" (IRQUE) has several projects in Jaffna aimed at raising the caliber of education through teacher training and better allocation of resources. The Asian Development Bank funds the "Post-Secondary Education and Modernization Project" intended to improve the quality of education and facilities in the region. In addition, the government's Open University offers distance-learning courses that are growing in popularity throughout the country. Open University coursework may be the answer for students living in troubled areas like Jaffna since they could continue their education far from a campus rife with

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political upheaval. However, until these projects and the Open University begin to reach substantially more students in Jaffna, young scholars in the northern Jaffna Peninsula will continue to suffer from a university in decline, hostage to the political vicissitudes of the country at large.

Lunstead